

# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 066 680

CG 007 359

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TITLE Sensitivity Training and the School Teacher: An Experiment in Favorable Publicity.  
PUB DATE 71  
NOTE 9p.  
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29  
DESCRIPTORS Group Dynamics; Groups; Inservice Teacher Education; Interaction Process Analysis; \*Sensitivity Training; \*Teacher Attitudes; \*Teacher Education; Teacher Improvement; \*Teacher Workshops; \*T Groups

## ABSTRACT

The workshop discussed was designed to initiate skeptical school personnel to the T-group approach, while providing a safe and non-threatening atmosphere for exposure. Workshop participants consisted of 24 "teachers of the gifted." An attempt was made to integrate procedures from a wide variety of group approaches so as to provide the participants with experiences in more than one kind of group. Using relationship as a measure of outcome, it was hypothesized that a high degree of relationship would exist in the groups, and that pre-test scores on a relationship measuring instrument would be lower than post-test scores. The results indicated that post-test as compared with pre-test "total relationship" scores changed significantly and in a positive direction. It was concluded that with careful planning and an emphasis on allowing the new participant to proceed at his own pace, the group experience can be fruitful and rewarding. (Author/BW)



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SENSITIVITY TRAINING AND THE SCHOOL TEACHER:  
AN EXPERIMENT IN FAVORABLE PUBLICITY

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Sensitivity training (viewed here as one variant of T-group) has been with us in its many forms (basic encounter, human relations, marathon) since the early 1950's. No other social-psychologically oriented practice has created such wide-spread furor of public and professional reaction as this movement, which brings a small group of persons together to increase personal awareness, develop more efficient communication skills, learn how small groups operate, or simply to enjoy the uninhibited intimacy of nude whirlpool bathing. Time, Life, and Newsweek have explicated (and exploited) the popular notoriety of the encounter movement, and Schrag (1969), among others has brought attention to the 'social science centers' in sophisticated publications like Harpers. To quote Back (1971): "...sensitivity training has become something to be talked about, something which certain types of people engage in, an integral part of popular culture." There is little doubt, moreover, that the 'group movement' or whatever it will be called, is here to stay awhile.

In and of itself, this group movement is not an unworthy phenomenon of (or perhaps reaction to) our times, an age torn by interracial problems, privation and poverty, war, dissent, and an increasing distance between a nation of strivers 'on the move.' When, in 1949, a small group of people in Bethel, Maine, discovered almost by accident an approach which was to grow into NTL (National Training Laboratory), small group interaction was primarily a research interest of the social-psychologist. It could not have been foreseen that in a mere two decades this 'intergroup relations' workshop idea would spread and develop into a full-scale movement. Nor could enthusiastic early investigators have prophesied the depth of negative reaction that would be elicited by their method twenty years later.

While some states have succeeded in bringing the sensitivity group approach into the school system (notably on either coast), a majority of states are at least skeptical concerning its use--and misuse--by counselors and educators in the school setting, reminiscent of the negative popular attitudes discussed above. Superintendents are worried about community

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reaction, principals are just as afraid of their superintendent's reactions, and the classroom teacher often appears to view the process, where hesitantly introduced into the social organization of the school, as dangerously threatening to maintenance of classroom order and discipline. In many states, then, it would appear that a statement exists, i.e., counselors are being trained to do a small group training while administrators and faculties seem to be voicing a collective "no!"

The workshop described here was designed to initiate skeptical school personnel to the T-group approach, while providing a safe and non-threatening atmosphere of exposure. It was the purpose of this workshop to introduce to a group of admittedly skeptical teachers a form of sensitivity training (sensitivity training is used here to encompass T-group exercises and a variety of sensory awareness activities).

#### Procedure

After some reflection as to which direction to go (i.e., introduce the sensitivity group notion to administrators, hoping that they might influence their staff, or vice versa) it was decided that a one-day orientation to sensitivity training might be designed for teaching staff of Minnesota schools following the format of an in-service workshop. A group of 35 "teachers of the gifted" were contacted for participation in a workshop based on group techniques. Of this group 24 accepted the invitation. The mean age of the group was 31 (a questionnaire given prior to participation determined a number of subject characteristics -- for instance, that only two of this group had had any experience or exposure to T-group or its variants). Participants were contacted several weeks before the workshop, and a letter explaining the purpose of the workshop was enclosed.<sup>1</sup> This letter included an explanation of the purposes of sensitivity training, a few groundrules which might be followed in the groups, and the suggestion that "...you may become as involved as you wish, and stand back if you wish--the structure of this experience will be determined in part by you, and will allow you to do with it what you feel most comfortable in."

#### Format of the Group Experience

The basic structure of the workshop included exercises from Gunther (1968), Schutz (1969), and Pfeiffer & Jones (1971). The purpose of this



workshop was to integrate procedures from a wide variety of "group approaches" so as to provide the participant with experiences in more than one kind of group. To this end the basic outline was structured to incorporate:

1. Self awareness--relaxation, fantasy, and bodily awareness exercises to be done by the participant alone and separated from group contact.
2. Other-awareness--Milling (blind), touching, and other non-verbal exercises culminating in the formation of dyads.
3. Group-awareness--the formation of larger groups from the dyads, and non-verbal greeting and other non-verbal group shared exercises.
4. T-group--cognitive activities based on improved communication and group awareness.
5. Closure--included explanation of the workshop, rationale behind the activities and exercises, and commentary on the workshop taken as a whole.

After an orientation announcement, reiterating the contents of the letter and answering participants' questions, everyone was asked to separate himself physically from other participants, and to concentrate only on his aloneness, reflecting on his reasons for being present at the workshop. Each participant was requested to find a space on the floor (a carpeted room was available) and to lie down in that space, stretching out as far as possible without touching any other participant. The group was then taken through a modified and abbreviated version of relaxation, after Jacobsen (1938). When all subjects were completely relaxed, they were asked to explore their "space," and to be aware of their bodies in that space (Gunther, 1968)--they were then exposed to "group fantasy" exercises (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1971).

After the experiencing of aloneness, space exploring, and fantasy, all participants were exposed to milling exercises and non-verbal touch activities, the approach being based on contact with one other person first, and then contact with more and more persons, as dyads became groups of four, and finally groups of eight. By this 'natural' process of selection, groups of eight to ten were ultimately formed, and these would be the T-groups for the remainder of the workshop. Facilitators were involved in all exercises but were not specifically acknowledged as leaders until later in the morning.



Egan (1970) and Marshall (1971), among others, speak of the apprehension and inhibiting anxiety that most newcomers to group process face. It was to this point that each group was asked to improvise a skit, a parody-play making fun of some "social" institution. Each skit would be designed such that it could include all other members of other groups. As yet no attempt had been made to institute formal introductions. Rather each group was left to determine, during the skit planning, how its members should become introduced to one another (it was felt by the planning staff--and proved to be true--that participants would probably be just as comfortable devising their own "awkward but honest" introductions).<sup>2</sup>

Following the skits each group was asked to find a corner and discuss their experiences thus far, reminded only that "here and now" and "feeling statements" were useful to facilitate this kind of discussion. It was by this time obvious who the group facilitators were, and many of the comments made at this point pertained to questions like: "Is this what we're supposed to be doing...;" "Do all sensitivity groups do the things we've been doing?" In some groups, then, material was generated for more or less cognitively-oriented discussion about the merits or demerits of groups, about participants' experiences (and expectancies) regarding the workshop, and about prior attitudes to "this kinda stuff!" At this point all of the groups appeared to be quite cohesive and close-knit. Where they had been a heterogeneous collection of individuals three hours earlier, they were now distinct and efficiently functioning units--as evidenced in part by the solidarity displayed when each group acted out, and then instructed the others in the performance of their planned skit.

Following the morning experiences, a "group" lunch was planned. All groups ate at separate tables and the only group facilitator input was "to be sociable and forget about the groups for awhile--get to know one another socially."

The afternoon was given over to T-groups. Each group now went to a separate room and spent the remainder of the day in process-oriented activity. At no time was any pressure brought to bear on participants to be any more open or honest than they felt they could be in the group context. In the main the afternoon's exercises were drawn from the NTL literature, and were primarily structured to effect improved communication skills. Other exercises for the afternoon group were drawn from Pfeiffer & Jones



(1971). Closure was based on a brief "talking through" of what had transpired during the workshop and the reactions participants had had from time to time. A brief relaxation exercise similar to the opening activities' was used to conclude the group (one group said "non-verbal goodbyes").

### Data Collection

Rogers (1961) proposed four dimensions of interpersonal relationship related to an "atmosphere" conducive for learning to occur. These dimensions are congruence, empathic understanding, unconditionality of regard, and level of regard. If indeed such dimensions are related to, or conducive to the learning process, then it would be valuable to assess to what degree these exist in the sensitivity group, and further, to what extent there are positive changes along these dimensions. Using relationship (comprised by these four variables) as a measure of outcome, it was hypothesized that a high degree of relationship would exist in the groups, and that pre-test scores on a relationship measuring instrument would be lower than post-test scores.

The Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI) purports to assess these dimensions described above (Barrett-Lennard, 1959; 1962). The BLRI has had wide and accepted use measuring relationship in the T-group setting (Clark & Culbert, 1965; Culbert, 1968; Friedman, 1969; von Redlich, 1967; to name a few studies).

The "group" form, MO-G-64 was modified for pre- and post-test purposes by the addition of qualifiers such as: "I anticipate... I expect that... They will," so that a measure might be taken of anticipated relationship as well as of "outcome" relationship. It was anticipated that participants' expectations of the type of relationship they might encounter in the sensitivity group would differ significantly from an assessed evaluation of that relationship after completing a one-day workshop in group training. In earlier, informal interviews with school teachers, the authors determined that consensus was generally negative concerning participation in a sensitivity group, and that interviewees were skeptical that any positive relationship could develop in such an atmosphere. It was further presumed that this negative viewpoint accounted in part for the lack of popularity of groups, and that on a larger scale this viewpoint was held generally by the school community. If the school teacher could be provided with a



sensitivity group workshop which was non-threatening, and which was modified and structured to take into account the apprehension of the school teacher, then the group might be a positive and "enlightening" experience.

The BLRI was administered one week prior to the workshop, and all completed forms were returned by mail. To avoid a "halo" effect (in many groups participants report an emotional "high" immediately following the group experience) the post-test was mailed to participants two weeks following the workshop, to allow initial reactions to mellow and to give participants an opportunity to reflect at some length on their experience. From the 24 participants, 15 BLRI's were collected pre- and post-test (of the remaining 9, 6 were marked incorrectly and 3 were not returned). Also, a questionnaire was included in the post-test, useful in comparing congruence of BLRI post-test scores with more personalized comments.

### Results

Results of the mean differences between pre- and post-test on each of five variables, i.e., level of regard, empathic understanding, unconditionality of regard, congruence, and total relationship from the BLRI are summarized in Table 1. Since directional hypotheses were advanced for each scale, all t-tests were one-tailed.

Means, Standard Deviations, and  $t$  for Pre-test and Posttest Evaluation Using the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory

Variables	Pretest		Posttest		$t$	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Level of Regard	20.47	12.65	32.07	11.69	2.52	.05*
Empathic Understanding	3.67	10.71	16.53	9.94	3.29	.01*
Unconditionality of Regard	-12.93	8.84	-0.20	13.00	3.11	.01
Congruence	9.26	13.88	20.73	12.49	2.29	.05
Total Relationship	22.87	29.49	69.13	40.42	3.46	.01

\* $t$  2.13 significant at .05 level (df=14)

\* $t$  2.95 significant at .05 level (df=14)



### Discussion

It may be seen from the above Table that attitudes concerning the level of relationship, indicated by pre- and posttest "total relationship" scores, changed significantly and in a positive direction. Using the BLRI only as a measure of change, it may follow that participants found that the degree of trust they might place in one another, the interest and concern of other participants for them, acceptance present in the group, and group cohesiveness (as perceived by the group member) were considerably greater than they had anticipated. In short, the relationships that they perceived developing via sensitivity training were more positive than they had anticipated (for a discussion of these variables and their contribution to the development of relationships see: Rogers, 1967; Rogers & Truax, 1967; Boller, 1970).

In review, many states' school systems see group training as a negative and non-essential activity. For the most part this attitude has been based upon unfavorable reporting, both in the popular press, and in some cases from the personal "testimony" of unimpressed (and often very threatened) school personnel-participants. The motivation for this study was to demonstrate that it is not group training as a tool that is at fault in many cases, but perhaps the ways in which groups are introduced to newcomers. Quite often the inexperienced counselor or group trainer, in his enthusiasm to involve the "new" participant in 'in-depth' group processes, loses sight of the fact that the accepted norms of groups which have met over long periods of time and with highly skilled professional trainers, are not norms acceptable to (nor comfortable to) the initiate. Further, the activities implemented in many 'sophisticated' groups may be extremely threatening, and are often blatantly harmful to the inexperienced. The newcomer, perhaps seeking the workshop-oriented group as a place for more or less cognitive, structured learnings, comes away from these experiences confused, frightened and angry, and assured that 'grouping' is as bad as he'd heard.

This study attempted to point out that, with careful planning and an emphasis on allowing the new participant to proceed at his own pace, the group experience can be fruitful and rewarding. Relationship was measured here not so much as a 'typical' outcome of the sensitivity group, but rather as an index of change as the result of a positive experience (change in attitude, based upon a priori knowledge of participants' negative attitudes regarding sensitivity groups prior to exposure). That group training is a tool and not an end in and of itself is probably well known to most group practitioners. In selling the



tool, however, we are also obliged to make palatable the process for which it is intended. No matter how useful the tool may be, nobody is going to buy it if they think they might get hurt while using it.

Footnotes:

1. It is the author's experience that much of the negative publicity attending a 'first' group experience can be attributed to lack of information, uncertainty as to what is expected and what might happen, and increasing feelings of threat and skepticism as the 'group' day approaches -- and that complete and honest pre-group information often allays this apprehension. An excellent review of the "pre-group contract" is presented in Egan (1970).
2. It must be kept in mind that the purpose of this workshop was to provide each participant with a rewarding and non-threatening experience, and to this end all activities were planned to elicit minimal anxiety -- this was a group experience aimed primarily at encouraging "favorable publicity" -- normal social behaviors were encouraged wherever possible.



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